Roger Simon Post 5/7/77

Now Appearing: Howard Hunt

CHICAGO—E. Howard Hunt Jr. arrived with the dessert. While 500 secretaries dug into their chocolate sundaes, the convicted Watergate burglar told them how the press in America is ruining the nation for decent people like him and them. He spoke 53 minutes. He was paid $2,000. Plus expenses.

Most countries punish their criminals. America puts them on speaking tours. Not ordinary criminals, of course. The poor schmoes, the Cubans whom Hunt duped into breaking into Watergate—they are not going to be giving speeches on National Secretaries Day like Hunt did.

No, it is only those members of the Watergate Follies—the convicted felons who disgraced a nation—who are now being paid to tell us how to lead better lives.

At the Holiday Inn ballroom they had to turn some secretaries away. Last year they heard from a local television anchorwoman. But this year they went Big Time.

"We called every reporter we could to let them know Howard Hunt was coming," said Tom Mahar, public relations man for the Holiday Inn. "Heck, this is good PR for us."

The desk manager of the Holiday Inn introduced Hunt, saying Hunt would be glad to sign autographs and pose for snapshots afterward. She warned people not to leave while he was speaking.

Dressed in a conservative suit and tie, Hunt made a long, dramatic entrance, walking the length of the ballroom. Except for its audacity when you consider who it was coming from, the speech was unrelieved in its dullness.

Hunt spoke of national security, the same national security he once claimed was the reason for breaking into Watergate. "Ever since Watergate, our security institutions have been under attack," he said. "The press has established itself as reviewer of our secrets, no matter how destructive to the United States."

The writer is a columnist for the Chicago Sun-Times.

He complained of the "television extravaganza whose purpose was to discredit our American way of life."

He said, "While there is a general public right to know about governmental affairs, I question whether there is a need to know about clandestine affairs."

He said that the press is "irresponsible" and operates "for the sake of headlines." And in one of the most pathetic linkages since Joe McCarthy led his witch hunts, Hunt said that the Central Intelligence Agency's secret operations have "drawn the most fire from the press and our Communist enemies."

Said Hunt, "I am not comfortable that my grandchildren may speak Russian as a first language before they reach middle age." He praised the former fascist government of Spain and said that "patriotism has become a dirty word."

He did not mention the fact that he helped break into Watergate in the dead of night, hiding a walkie-talkie up his pants leg. He did not mention that he helped plan the break-in of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office. He did not mention that he was once asked to poison columnist Jack Anderson.

He described his prison term as "political" and "pure harassment." He said that as long as Richard Nixon was pardoned, he should have been pardoned, too.

Afterward, he signed scores of autographs. He posed for Instamatic pictures, standing beside anyone who asked. If he continues to speak just once a week this year he will gross more than $100,000.

Like his fellow Watergate convictees, the only appeal Hunt has, his only drawing card, is his criminality. What once made him despised now makes him money.

It is not as if the press seeks these men out to harass them. They flaunt themselves, displaying their thuggery like sideshow freaks once displayed their bodies. And, apparently, the public is willing to stare.

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